

Black Lagoon

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By : **Juggernaut**

A story about everyday beggars in India, some turn into godmen for living and respectability.



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By

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Marrayya was a professional panhandler, a profession he inherited from his mother. Growing up begging with her mother, Marrayya learned by-heart several popular melodies with lyrics changed to suite the celebration of Hindu gods such as Krishna, Vishnu, Lakshmi, Hanuman or a particular Hindu festival. Some times, he made up lyrics on spot praising the devotees to entice them to donate for a just cause of a poor beggar like him.

The temples were crowded on Saturday, a holy day to many Hindus, but other days of festivities also attracted many devotees. Marrayya inherited a space to squat close to the temple entrance from where his mother begged for years before she passed away. He made sure nobody occupied his place, if Marrayya arrived late at his place, no other beggar occupied it from fear of an ugly fight with him.

The temple authorities allowed beggars to squat in rows on either side of the entrance to the temple. Beggars at the beginning of the row stood better chance of collecting donations than those at the lower end since the devotees ran out of their contribution quickly after donating to few beggars at the beginning of the row. Beggars fought for the coveted forward spaces in the pecking order. Some beggars traded their lucrative forward spaces with others for money.

Marayya grew up with chronic hunger. As an adult, he was small and dark skinned with sunken eyes. His un-kept beard and shoulder length matted hair looked more like brown compressed hanging plant roots that gave an appearance of person in perpetual hunger and grief.

Marayya met his future wife Parwathi, â Paruâ for short at the temple. She also grew up begging with her parents. Paru was short and brown skinned with her bright eyes could be mistaken for a middle class woman if not for the rags she wore and un-kept dirty hair. Marayya and his wife followed their parentsâ footsteps in begging as a full time job.

â Paru, look at her, she is rich and generous, make sure to beg for her sympathy,â Marayya murmurs to his wife pointing to an old lady entering the temple.

When the old lady was coming out of the temple with prasad (flowers and fruits) in her hand, Paru wasted no time to go after her begging for money. â Amma (mother), please look at my empty stomach,â she

Black Lagoon

begged, repeatedly pointing out to her own thin, flat stomach almost caved-in due to malnutrition

The old woman threw few coins into the hand of Paru along with a banana, and walked past Paru, distributing coins to the other beggars in the line until she ran out of the change.

As years went by, Marayya and Paru had pretty good impression of most of the regular temple visitors and their charitable habits. They never persisted on begging those known to give nothing, and focussed on those known to be generous and giving.

On a particular Hindu annual festival, a short woman dressed in silk sari with glittering gold ornaments around her neck and wrist visited the temple. With the look of goddess Mahalashkmi (goddess of wealth), the woman, a doctor's wife served steamed rice mixed with vegetable curry to the beggars. On this day, Paru brought a huge empty steel bowl to collect the food from the Doctor's wife. "Amma, you are Mahalakshimi, with your own hands please drop few more servings of rice," begged Paru, lifting the container close to the woman.

Few feet from Paru, Marayya pleaded with the woman to help his family eat at least once a day. With both hands underneath a large plastic bowl, Marayya held the bowl up in the air like a person receiving a gift from the heaven. Between husband and wife, they collected enough food to last more than a day.

The temple attendance was poor on weekdays as the devotees, mostly older people trickled in slowly. These devotees sat on the temple stone floors chatting than participating in prayers, and made no donations to the beggars. On these days, Paru sat alone at the entrance of the temple while Marayya roamed the town begging the small shopkeepers at the curbside.

To entice the shop owners to donate few coins, Marayya came out with a simple plan. Since every shop has either picture or small idol of one or more of Hindu gods, Marayya conducted a brief on-site puja (prayer) singing one of his melodies, and lit an incense stick. As the perfume smoke from the burning incense filled the storefront, he prayed loud and placed a flower in front of the idol.

Marayya dressed appropriately with a loose-fitting garb or loincloth in shades of yellow, orange, or red, representing the color of purity. He groomed his long beard and shoulder length hair. He rubbed his bare shoulders and forehead with vebuthi or scented limestone powder to symbolize purity and disinterest in worldly comforts. In one hand, he carried a large sea conch that sounded like a saxophone when he blew air through a small hole at one end. For Hindus, the sound of conch is symbolic victory over evil as depicted in epic war in Mahabharata, an ancient scripture. Marayya blew the conch for few seconds so as not to irritate the shopkeeper or his customers with the annoying sound.

Marayya would accomplish the prayer duties- lighting up the incense stick, and a quick recital that ended with blowing the conch in quick succession. Since, a prayer was conducted only during shop opening hours, he moved fast to cover several shops to repeat the prayer ritual. During these daily routines, he never begged for money. On Fridays, however, he would carry a large brass plate with yellow turmeric powder and few leaves of Tulasi, a plant sacred to Hindus, to collect dakshen (monetary donation) from the shopkeepers. As the shopkeepers dropped coins into his plate, he gave one or two sacred Tulasi leaves to shop owners as prasad (god's gift). When Marayya visited the shops to conduct on-site prayer, he acted more like a person of god than a beggar did. The melodies he learnt from his mother and the garb he wore made easy for him to transform into a godly person from the simple beggar he was.

On Saturdays and Hindu festive celebrations, he joined his wife Paru at the temple to beg the temple devotees. "Babu, Baba, Narayana (ultimate god), please look at these unfortunate, worthless lives," begged Marayya pointing to himself and wife at the temple entrance.

Black Lagoon

On occasions, Paru borrowed one or two malnourished children from other beggars to sit close to her to beg for kindness of the devotees to feed the children.

â Marayya, do you think I can join with you to beg the storefronts, I wasnâ t collecting anything at all on weekdays at the temple except guarding our space,â Paru reasoned one day with her husband.

â People were accustomed to see godly men not women conducting the prayers, many consider godly women as bad omen, â said thoughtful Marayya to Paru.

Paruâ s disappointment was overwhelming. She spent most of her life at the temple, people are not as generous as in the past towards the beggars. With a mean look at her, some devotees even commented that she should get a servant job than squatting comfortably to beg for easy money.

â Listen Paru, we have to secure our places at the temple first before we make any plans, may be we could ask some other beggars at the temple to occupy our space in return to share their collection, but again, they may not be honest at the end of the day to share the agreed amount with us,â pondered Marayya.

â We can sell the space for good and never go back to the temple?â Paru, now really thinking in business terms.

â True, at least we need to replace the temple income as meager it was with something else before we consider that option,â Marayya was thinking loud.

â You know Paru, I see lots of tourists from other countries at some of the big hotels in the town, they look rich otherwise they wonâ t be visiting this far off country, you could try begging at the hotelsâ entrance,â advised Marayya.

Marayya wasted no time to negotiate a good price for their life long forward spaces in temple row with other long time beggar, and moved on with his plans with his wife.

Paru dressed in rags would stand near the entrance of a five-star hotel in down town to beg the tourists. Every time she saw tourists came out of the hotel, she ran behind them begging for money â Sir, Babu, Baba, please help me to eat at least once a day,â she cried. The hotel security guards kept beggars away from the hotel entrance but Paruâ s persistence to reach the foreign tourists always paid off.

Paru has no children of her own, she borrowed children of other beggars to surround herself while begging for mercy. Some foreigners were forgiving and threw money at her and some distanced themselves from her with disgust.

Though Paru struggled every day with the security guards at the hotels to reach the tourists, she came out good at the end of the day compared with begging at the temple. The foreigners showed more pity and donated more compared with temple devotees who visited the temple for godâ s free blessing and prasad (free give away like fruits).

Paru occupied a permanent place for herself at the entrance of a five-star hotel. Though the hotel security would chase her away several times a day, she would return to her spot. â Beggars are not choosers,â she would repeat it loud to herself like mantra. â You know, we have to make a living like you,â she would make demands at the security guards who were accustomed to her presence at the hotel entrance.

Black Lagoon

Marayya's vision of begging expanded as years went by. He could not cover many stores during the limited morning hours to conduct the quick prayer. And, the shop owners preferred prayers only in the morning hours for good business through out the day.

Meanwhile, Marayya was facing stiff competition from others, who were slowly trickling to the City to make living by performing on-site puja at the storefronts.

Marayya realized that he could not compete with so many other competitors that were taking away his business. He formulated a business plan to bring his competitors that perform storefront prayers into a single group and manage the entire business.

Marayya cajoled or threatened if necessary his competitors to join with him peacefully in the business venture. Marayya dressed permanently in prayer garb to give credibility to his own authority over his competitors.

He bought the incense sticks, turmeric powder, vebuthi etc., in bulk to distribute to his members. He chose the routes carefully to assign to his members and never allowed any one member to visit the same route several times to discourage friendship with the shop owners. He maintained a tight grip over the membership and their loyalty. After expenses for material supplied such as brass plates, incense sticks, turmeric powder, loose fitting garbs, wooden bead necklaces etc., Marayya paid weekly stipends to the beggars turned roaming godly persons.

Marayya and Paru have no place of their own to live. They slept on the sidewalks or at construction sites. With the income from storefront prayers and begging at five-star hotels, Marayya and Paru built a shed with metal sheets at the edge of black lagoon, named after its dark brackish water. The lagoon was a reservoir into which raw sewage was drained through a network of city open sewer system. Not many town people walk pass near the black lagoon as the intense stench of sewer gas around the black lagoon made people sick. Only funeral processions took place around the lagoon since the only town cremation ground was located in that area.

Mostly beggars found themselves living on the edge of the black lagoon. For Marayya and Paru living on the edge of the black lagoon in their own home, though a tin shed was a vast improvement in their life style.

Every day, early in the morning, Marayya and his men clad in loose garb in orange or red left the black lagoon walking slowly towards their assigned routes to conduct on-site prayers at storefronts. Paru and other women traveled to either hotels or temples to occupy their designated spaces.

Marayya and Paru turned the curbside begging considered as low-life into well-established enterprise of professional panhandling with purpose of providing on-site prayer to many storefronts or exploiting the foreign tourists.

Marayya with his own prayer team to cover several storefronts in town and Paru with her lucrative place to beg at a five-star hotel entrance, settled comfortably at the edge of the black lagoon, a place of their own. They often said to themselves â who said beggars are not choosers.â

Black Lagoon

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